

Written evidence submitted by British Committee for Iran Freedom (MENA0015)

Summary of key recommendations

- call on Iran and other nations in the region to revoke all laws which discriminate against women.
- require the release of all political prisoners in Iran and other MENA countries.
- insist on the immediate release of protesters in the current uprising who remain imprisoned in Iran.
- seek to create a coalition to hold criminally accountable officials of countries where human rights are abused. This specifically includes those responsible for the deaths of protestors in the current uprising in Iran as well as the 1988 massacre of 30,000 political prisoners.
- oppose the payment of ransoms being paid for hostages held in Iran hostage-taking and require the immediate release of such hostages.
- proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iran's Intelligence Ministry as terrorist organisations in their entirety under the Terrorism Act 2000.
- recognise the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people and the people of other nations in the region where respect for human rights is not guaranteed and support those looking to bring about democratic change, including Maryam Rajavi and the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI).
- as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, press for a UN-sponsored fact-finding mission to Iran and other countries where political prisoners are subject to torture and execution.

British Committee for Iran Freedom

With more than 20 years of experience and expertise in relation to Iran and the Middle East, the British Committee for Iran Freedom (BCFIF) is a leader for analysis of Iranian affairs. For more info please visit: www.iran-freedom.org

Comprised of over 100 cross-Party MPs and Peers, the Committee has been active in calling for a firm approach towards Iran's theocratic regime and support for the Iranian people in their aspiration for a secular democratic republic.

Introduction

When considering the UK's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, due regard must be given to Iran and its influence throughout the region. The pillars of UK policy must include –

1. Guaranteeing human rights;
2. Advocating for regional stability; and
3. Supporting the rule of law

The Iranian regime's actions, both at home and throughout the region, are at odds with all three of those pillars.

Inside the country, the regime continues to commit large-scale human rights abuses. In the last twelve months, since the uprising of 2022 began, over 750 protestors have been killed. Over 30,000 have been arrested, some of whom have been among the more than 300 executed this year alone, and many have experienced appalling torture in Iranian prisons.¹²³

In the region, the regime has a malign influence. Through its nuclear weapons ambitions, its supply of drones to Russia, its support for terrorism, its ballistic missiles programme and its use of hostage taking, the regime is intent on creating regional instability.

The United Kingdom's historical ties with the entire region give us a unique opportunity to lead the way in creating stability, encouraging the establishment of political institutions and helping to facilitate democratic change.

Establishing democracy vs political stability

It is key at this stage to note that it is not the UK's role to establish democracy, but rather to help create an environment where democratic forces are allowed to flourish and regimes are not free to commit human rights abuses, encourage terrorism and foster instability. There are multiple ways that this can be achieved without direct military action or financial commitment.

Furthermore, it must be recognised political stability cannot be achieved without the establishment of democracy. Over many years, past British governments, US administrations and their European counterparts have attempted to engage with Iran. Massive incentives have been provided to Iran, not in the hope that democracy will prevail, but that Iran will step away from its destructive influence and that political stability will ensue. Each and every such effort has failed, for the reason that regimes such as Iran's thrive on political instability.

The three pillars of foreign policy set out above are the only solution for political stability. A review of Iranian history shows us that until those norms are established at even the most basic of levels, there will never be stability.

In the Iranian people's revolution against the monarchy in February 1979, the main demands of the people were freedom and democracy. They had risen up against censorship and oppression, arrests and torture of political and human rights activists and corruption within the ruling Shah's family. The main leading opposition groups had experienced oppression from the Shah's SAVAK service and many of their leaders were imprisoned, some executed.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was exiled in Iraq, took advantage of the Iranian people's religious tendencies and, by utilising a network of mullahs already in Iran, was able to mislead people as to his true intentions. He established a stranglehold on the leadership of the revolution to achieve his "Islamic Republic".

The 1979 revolution happened because the Iranian people were denied the most basic of political freedoms. The Islamic Republic has since delivered much of the same and the Iranian people have demonstrated that they are no longer willing to accept such oppression. For as long as an oppressive regime exists, instability will continue.

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/iran-child-detainees-subjected-to-flogging-electric-shocks-and-sexual-violence-in-brutal-protest-crackdown/>

² <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/ncr-statements/statement-human-rights/iran-the-execution-of-21-prisoners-in-the-first-9-days-of-the-persian-month-of-mehr-a-criminal-act/>

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/iran-executions-of-tortured-protesters-must-trigger-a-robust-reaction-from-the-international-community/>

The Iranian people's uprising following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini has the sole aim of establishing a true democracy in Iran. The two key slogans of the protestors are:

'Down with the oppressor whether the Shah or leader (Khamenei)'

'With or without Hijab onwards to a revolution'

The United Kingdom should heed the voices of the Iranian people and support their call for democracy and human rights.

Why Iran?

Human rights abuses

The Iranian regime commits human rights abuses under the banner of the Absolute Rule of the Clergy (Velayat e Faqih) and does so through the IRGC and Basij.

The biggest sufferers are women, as every regime policy has misogyny at its heart. Forcing them to wear a veil and excluding them from areas of education and participation in certain jobs creates a system built on the abuse of women. That abuse is most pronounced in Iranian prisons, with female prisoners facing the most appalling forms of sexual violence, including gang rape.

Violence against women and oppression across the entirety of Iranian society has worsened since the latest uprising began in September 2022, following the killing of Mahsa Jina Amini. Over 750 protestors have been killed, tens of thousands arrested and torture and execution is rife.

The record of the regime includes the execution of around 120,000 dissidents and political activists, the massacre of 30,000 political prisoners in the space of a few months in the summer of 1988 because of their support for the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI), the execution of thousands (including over 350 this year alone), the killing of at least 1,500 of the protestors in the popular protests in November 2019 and 750 during the current uprising.

The IRGC was responsible for firing two missiles at the Ukrainian Airlines aircraft in January 2020, resulting in the deaths of 176 passengers.

In the latest act of oppression of Iranian women, the regime has passed a new Bill increasing prison terms and fines for defying the degrading and discriminatory compulsory veiling laws.⁴

Diana Eltahawy, Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, said in response:

"States must urgently call on the Iranian authorities to revoke the Bill and abolish all degrading and discriminatory compulsory veiling laws and regulations. They must also pursue legal pathways at the international level to hold Iranian officials accountable for ordering, planning and committing such widespread and systematic violations against women and girls."

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/>

That is exactly what the UK government should be doing. We should insist that Iran revokes all laws which discriminate against women and should lead the way in creating a coalition to use legal pathways to hold Iranian officials accountable for the crimes they commit.

Hostage-taking

The taking hostage of individuals with dual citizenship is routinely employed by the regime to obtain ransom money and other benefits. The UK has experienced this through the imprisonment and ultimate release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

The practice of hostage-taking for ransom has now been extended to obtaining the release of convicted Iranian criminals. This should deeply concern us for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it goes entirely against our foreign policy aims of ensuring that the rule of law is upheld. The accredited Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi was convicted in Belgium in 2021 of planning a thwarted bomb attack against the National Council of Resistance of Iran's (NCRI) annual Free Iran Summit in Paris. At the event were not only tens of thousands of Iranians who were supporting Maryam Rajavi, the President-elect of the NCRI, but also a large number of international politicians, including a delegation from this Committee. The attempted attack targeted the democratic right of Iranians in exile to protest and also the politicians supporting them.

Assadi was sentenced to twenty years in prison, but was released earlier this year through a prisoner swap. He was hailed as a hero in Tehran and was photographed with President Raisi.

Such deals fail to uphold the rule of law and not only encourage the Iranian regime to continue to take hostages, but also encourage other undemocratic regimes to do the same. For such reason the UK must lead the way in condemning hostage-taking.⁵

It is likely that, whilst hostages so far have been taken mainly within Iran, the regime will no expand the policy in the region and attempt to take hostages in nearby Gulf states, from where there is easy transfer to Iran.

Moreover, the payment of ransoms for hostages sends entirely the wrong message to the Iranian people, who are seeking a democratic republic built on the principles of upholding the rule of law and safeguarding human rights.

At a time when many of them are laying down their lives in the quest for a free and democratic future, they see European nations and the US paying huge ransom sums to Iran. It emboldens the regime and sends a message to the Iranian people that when there is an impact on their citizens, Western nations are willing to pay enormous sums, but do little to support Iranians who are suffering daily.

Finally, there can be little doubt that the Swedish diplomat Johan Floderus, currently held in Iran, is being used as a bargaining counter to obtain the release of Hamid Noury, who was convicted for his involvement in the massacre of thousands of political prisoners in 1988. A man found guilty of involvement in torture and executions, who was rightly sentenced to life in prison, should not be released under any circumstances to the Iranian regime.⁶

The UK should take the lead in ensuring that Noury remains imprisoned and that there is a unified international refusal to do prisoner swaps with the Iranian regime or pay ransoms for

⁵ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/belgiums-release-of-iranian-bomb-plotter-assadollah-assadi-after-tehran-regime-took-charity-worker-hostage-will-lead-to-more-terrorist-attacks-in-europe-struan-stevenson-4281060>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/swedish-court-verdict-iran-prison-executions-trial-due-thursday-2022-07-14/>

hostages. This will also send a message to others in the region, whether governments or terrorist organisations, that the use of hostage-taking is not a tactic that will succeed.

Israel and Palestine

The continuing political standoff between Israel and Palestine is unfortunately used by external parties to foster division, unrest and extremism. The difficulties experienced by Palestinians are used by extremists to justify terrorism against Israel.

The Iranian regime's support for organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas is in no way aimed at supporting Palestinians. The regime knows all too well that the activities of Hezbollah and Hamas make it extremely difficult for a political solution to be found.

The creation of an existential enemy through stirring up hatred for Israel is a tool used by the regime to suppress opposition within Iran and justify its expansionary policies. It finds justification for its nuclear ambitions through asserting the threat from Israel. Its ballistic missiles projects are justified by the same asserted threat.

Protestors are oppressed and alleged to be acting on behalf of foreign nations. All of this means that the Iranian regime has no political interest in a viable resolution to the issue of Israel and Palestine; quite the contrary.

Iran should be sanctioned for its support for Hamas and Hezbollah. Remove the baneful influence of the Iranian regime and a political solution in Palestine may possible be achieved. Whilst Iran remains entangled in the issue, such a solution is sadly remote.

Migration

Today, throughout Europe the issue of illegal immigration from the Middle East and North Africa is top of the political agenda. Of those arriving in the UK after the perilous journey across the Channel in small boats, among the highest number are from Iran. Alongside Iran in the top seven countries from which those individuals come are Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Sudan.

These figures illustrate that without stability in the region, with the resources of these nations being used to support their people, the lack of human rights and democracy will indirectly impact the UK. Concerns over migration can be addressed through a foreign policy that has the three pillars set out above at the forefront of everything we do.

Young Iranian men and women are leaving their homes because life in Iran is no life for them. If they assert their right to the most basic of freedoms, the freedom to assemble and protest, they put their lives at risk. If they show any form of opposition to the regime's egregious human rights abuses, they also put their lives at risk.

For so long as human rights abuses continue in Iran and the nation's resources are used to fund terrorism, nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, Iranians will continue to risk their lives to escape to the free world.

If we are truly committed to resolving the issue of illegal immigration, then we should be committed to a foreign policy of guaranteeing human rights, advocating for regional stability and supporting the rule of law through our actions, and not merely words.

Unless we and other Western nations adopt such an approach, the issue of mass illegal migration will not readily be resolved.

Risk to European-based dissidents

We have seen that the Iranian regime has intensified its efforts to target Iranian dissidents abroad. As mentioned above, this has included an attempted terrorist attack on French soil against an NCRI gathering.

Earlier this year MI5 and the Metropolitan Police announced that there had been 15 plots by Iran to kill or kidnap UK nationals or UK-based individuals. Iran is no doubt the greatest threat to stability in the Middle East, but, much more than that, it is a regime that targets individuals on UK soil. This is a huge threat that must be addressed and eliminated.

In addition, the regime's activities are extending further into constraining the rights of Iranians in Europe. Earlier this year, a rally to coincide with the Free Iran World Summit in Paris and to show support for the NCRI and Maryam Rajavi's ten-point-plan for a future Iran was cancelled by the French authorities owing to threats of terrorism.

This decision was ultimately overturned by the French courts, but it is a significant concern that the Iranian regime's influence is stretching as far as limiting the right of Iranians to protest in Paris.⁷

In addition, the regime has attempted to influence the Albanian authorities⁸ into limiting the rights of members of the PMOI based at Camp Ashraf-3 in Albania.

It is essential that the UK government should condemn illegal efforts by Iran to browbeat European countries into restricting the human rights of its opponents and encourage European counterparts to uphold the rule of law. This includes calling on the government of Albania in particular to uphold the rights of members of the Iranian opposition PMOI at Ashraf-3, under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and international law. Every individual is entitled to the right to political activity under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the members of the PMOI are no exception.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)

The IRGC is now the main powerhouse behind everything the Iranian regime does, both internally and within the region. The IRGC has a tight stronghold over Iran's economy, it leads the regime's ballistic missiles programmes, is integral to the regime's sponsorship of terrorism and supplies drones to Russia.

Any incentive offered to Iran, either through resurrected nuclear deals or ransom paid for hostages, will involve money making its way through to the IRGC. Through complex company structures and front organisations, the IRGC leads the regime's efforts to bypass sanctions. In a country where people are finding it difficult to purchase basic necessities because of hyperinflation and poverty is rife, the IRGC funds regional terrorism, develops ballistic missiles and supports Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions. The Iranian people are poor not because of international sanctions, but because the IRGC uses the nation's resources for its own purposes.

⁷ <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/iran/#:~:text=Designated%20as%20a%20State%20Sponsor,elsewhere%20throughout%20the%20Middle%20East>.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-condemns-iran-for-reckless-cyber-attack-against-albania>

Iran is currently financing Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iraq, the terrorist groups Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Jaysh al-Mahdi, Hashd al-Shaabi, Badr Corps, and others in Iraq; the Houthis in Yemen; Bashar al-Assad in Syria; Hamas and Hezbollah against Israel; and the export of weapons and explosives to dissidents in Bahrain and other countries in the region.

Given the IRGC's key role in creating disastrous instability in the region, its actions should be curtailed through listing it as a terrorist organisation.

Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programme

Whilst Iran's nuclear programme remains headline news, its ballistic missile development effort is an equal concern. The regime has claimed that it has successfully launched an imaging satellite into space⁹. That technology could also be used to develop offensive nuclear weapons. The programme is led by the IRGC, which also has its own space programme and military development programmes alongside Iran's regular armed forces.¹⁰

As recently reported by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran has enough enriched uranium to near weapons grade, to enable it soon to build several nuclear weapons. This raises multiple concerns. Firstly, the regime's activities and destructive influence mean there is a real possibility that it will use its nuclear capabilities when achieved.¹¹ Secondly, Israel and the US have stated that air strikes will be carried out on Iran if it does develop nuclear weapons. Thirdly, Saudi Arabia has confirmed that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons it will do so also.

All of this means that Iran's ballistic and nuclear programmes must be constrained to avoid significant regional instability. The only meaningful way to achieve that is through comprehensive, coordinated sanctions to reduce the financial power the regime has to support these programmes.

The correct approach

We must take the three pillars of foreign policy set out above and lead the way in supporting democratic forces throughout the MENA region. This must be a two-pronged approach, making clear to any government that creates instability, that does not abide by the rule of law and that commits human rights abuses, that it will not be permitted to do so without consequences. Those consequences must include sanctions which impact the leaders of those regimes.

The second prong of the approach must be supporting democratic opposition movements that strive to achieve exactly the aims we support: stability, adherence to the rule of law and respect for human rights. There are many groups keen to achieve bring freedom and democracy to their nation, and our committee works closely with one such group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) and its President-elect Maryam Rajavi.

This year over 100 former world leaders and over 3,000 politicians have endorsed Maryam Rajavi's ten-point-plan for a future Iran.¹²

The UK should support democratic movements such as the NCRI.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/iran-satellite-launch-fcdo-statement>

¹⁰ <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/exclusive-report/timeline-of-irans-opposition-exposing-the-regimes-terror-networks-ballistic-missile-projects/>

¹¹ <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/nuclear/secret-memos-unveil-iranian-regimes-covert-deals-to-acquire-phosphate-soil-for-nukes/>

¹² <https://women.ncr-iran.org/2023/05/27/100-former-world-leaders/>
<https://www.maryam-rajavi.com/en/viewpoints/plan-for-future-of-iran/>

Conclusion

The UK, through its historical ties to the region, is uniquely well-placed to influence change. A review of history shows us that stability can be achieved only where there is true freedom, democracy and respect for human rights. We must move forward with the three pillars of foreign policy set out above and assist the people of the region to gain true democratic change and conditions in which their human rights are respected.

Our recommendations are set out at the top of this submission.

October 2023